

Evaluation of a Continuing Professional Education Opportunity via an On-line Service

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Registered Dietitians (RDs) who are members of the on-line service America Online have the opportunity to participate in regular journal club sessions for continuing education credits. A survey conducted after the first six months found that most participants found the journal club to be a convenient way to network with RDs from across the country and earn continuing education credits which compared favorably with traditional journal club meetings.

INTRODUCTION

In today's era of health care reform, there is a need for quality continuing education (CE) that is flexible with an individual's schedule. With staff reductions, especially in clinical dietetics, scheduling time off for CE activities is becoming increasingly difficult. Budgets are being reduced, and monies set aside for CE are often the first to be cut. If funding is available, the expense of traveling to a CE event out of town often prohibits participation. In some instances, even CE activities of interest that are conducted in the local area can be difficult to attend if it is scheduled during regular working hours.

Dietetics professionals are also recognizing the need to keep up with the rapid advancements in medical nutrition therapy research as evidenced by the major revisions in the recommended approach towards diet modifications for people with diabetes and renal disease within the past two years.

Registered dietitians using the on-line service America Online (AOL) have been able to receive CE credits for participating in an on-line journal club since January 1995.¹ This paper reports on a survey of participants in this journal club after the first six months.

METHODS

The Registered Dietitians' Journal Club (RDJC) meets every other Wednesday night at 9 PM Eastern Time on America Online (AOL). AOL offers members private "chat rooms" for computer conferencing similar to Internet Relay Chat (IRC) in which discussion participants can read each others comments as they are typed in the form of a transcript. While IRC is similar to the AOL chat

rooms, it is not offered by all Internet service providers and is somewhat less user friendly. Registered dietitians who are members of AOL and have joined the Dietetics Online professional networking group are told the name of the private chat room, and how to find it. This allows the journal club coordinator to control access to the room to professionals only. These private chat rooms can accommodate up to 23 members at one time.

The topics and reading list for the journal club are determined at the beginning of each year, and approved by the Commission on Dietetic Registration (CDR). The schedule is posted to a dedicated bulletin board within the AOL system on a monthly basis. Members who are interested in attending the journal club must read the articles listed prior to the journal club session to be awarded CE credits.

One to three articles are selected for each meeting. Articles are chosen primarily from the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, which each member of the American Dietetic Association receives monthly. This was done in an effort to accommodate participants who are in rural areas and/or who work in facilities which do not have medical libraries. When articles from other journals are more relevant to the topic being discussed, the journal club coordinator offers to send a copy of the article via US Mail to the individuals who do not have access to the journal. Whenever possible, the authors of the assigned articles are asked to join the journal club session to share their expertise in the topic area.

Topics for the journal club sessions primarily cover medical nutrition therapy areas, which is in keeping with demographic data about the group.² There are, however, occasional sessions on managerial and food service administration related topics.

Each RDJC session begins with introductions where each participant gives their first name and home town. The moderator then begins the discussion by asking for each participant to contribute their thoughts on the take home message of the readings. Discussion continues for approximately one hour, although several sessions can and have run

significantly longer if the participants are interested in continuing.

At one point during the last half of the session, the coordinator will ask the participants who are interested in receiving CE credit for the session to send a private instant message (a feature within the AOL system that allows one member to send a private message instantly to another member) with the individual's full name and professional registration number. This allows for a relatively confidential exchange of information, and does not disrupt the discussion. The information is then recorded on reporting forms and sent to the CDR for processing.

There are no fees for participation in the RDJC other than the AOL service fees for the time spent on-line. AOL is currently charging \$9.95 per month which includes five free hours on-line, with additional time billed at \$2.95 per hour. The RDJC coordinator is a volunteer member of the Dietetics Online networking group. There are no fees required for participation in Dietetics Online.

The RDJC is approved to offer one hour of Category II continuing education credit for each session through the CDR. This group is the first (and currently the only) on-line journal club to be approved by the CDR. As a stipulation of approval for this unconventional format for a journal club, the CDR has requested that the journal club coordinator conduct periodic surveys of participants to assess the quality of these sessions.

Surveys were sent via electronic mail to all members who participated in the first six months of the journal club. Participants were asked to comment on: 1) the advantages of this journal club, 2) the disadvantages, 3) whether the articles been beneficial to professional practice, 4) whether the discussions have been helpful, 5) whether the topics were relevant to professional practice, 6) how this format compares to face-to-face sessions, and 7) suggestions for improving this journal club. The survey questions were meant to be answered in a narrative format, so respondents often offered several pieces of information for each question.

RESULTS

Over the six month period, between 6 - 14 individuals participated in each session (average: 10). The survey was sent to all 37 individuals who had participated in at least one session during the first six months. Fifteen replies were received, which corresponds to a 40% response rate.

Advantages

Most of the respondents felt that the opportunity to network with RDs from across the country (7 of 15 replies) and the easy access to CE credits (7 of 15) were the major advantages to the RDJC sessions. Many replies also mentioned that the low cost of the program was important to their decision to participate (5 of 15).

The fact that participation in these journal club sessions did not require leaving home was important, especially to participants who are parents of young children. Several replies mentioned the advantage of not having to locate CE sessions and parking at other facilities as an advantage. One respondent mentioned that she appreciated this opportunity for CE because the journal club in her facility had been discontinued due to budget cuts.

Disadvantages

Reported disadvantages related primarily to technological problems. The most common problems were: difficulty following the discussion because the AOL chat room system allows the individual to type only two lines at a time, and complete thoughts often need to be expressed through two to three entries (4 of 15 replies); difficulty signing on to AOL through a local access number or difficulty getting into the chat room area once signed on due to system traffic (6 of 15); or problems with lag times between the time an individual submits an entry to the conversation and the time it appears on the screen (3 of 15).

Several respondents said that they missed the face-to-face interaction of a traditional journal club session (3 of 15). One person mentioned having difficulty with typing which made it difficult to express herself in this format.

Difficulty attending meetings due to time zone differences were also reported (4 of 15 responses). One person also mentioned having difficulty being able to use the family computer in the evenings as other members of the family needed to use it as well.

Readings

The majority of respondents felt that the assigned readings were beneficial to their practice (10 of 15 replies). Three respondents felt that only a few of the readings were of interest. Only one person felt that the readings did not apply to her area of practice.

Quality of Discussions

Respondents also felt that the discussions were beneficial to their practice (13 of 15 replies). Many felt that the diverse geographic distribution of journal club participants was beneficial, especially when

sharing information about recent Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) site reviews. Diversity of viewpoints was mentioned as a beneficial aspect of this group.

Topics

The majority of respondents felt that the topics were beneficial to their practice (10 of 13 replies).

Comparison to Traditional Journal Club Meetings

Most respondents acknowledged the advantages and disadvantages of both traditional journal club settings and the on-line version. Three respondents commented that participants tend to be more open with their thoughts and opinions with the relative anonymity of the on-line medium. On the other hand, one person said that she missed being able to see the reaction to comments which lend deeper insight to conversations.

Several people commented that while each format of journal club sessions has their drawbacks, the convenience of the on-line format made up for the disadvantages.

DISCUSSION

With the increasing popularity of home computing and commercial on-line services, most of the technology previously available only through a university setting is now available to professionals who may not have a university affiliation. This technology allows individuals access to computer conferencing simply by dialing the on-line service's local access number. This also enlarges the number of possible participants making the journal club sessions more feasible to offer.

In addition to requiring access to university based mainframe computers, university level courses that have been offered by computer conferencing have required the use of e-mail or message boards to communicate limiting the speed at which discussions can occur.^{3,4}

The AOL software used for this journal club has the advantage of being accessible to the primary operating systems of most home computers (DOS, Windows and Macintosh). As of July 1996, local access through AOLnet covers 470 cities across the United States. The AOLGLOBALnet international access network provides a local access number for the AOL system in 83 countries, representing more than 230 major cities worldwide. Also, an 800 number can be used for access in the United States, Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands if a local access number is not available.

A study conducted in January 1995 looking at the demographics of registered dietitians using the AOL service found that 24% of those surveyed had difficulty finding enough continuing education activities to meet the requirements for continued registration.² Seventy four percent of respondents reported living in urban areas, a demographic which may have changed significantly over the past year as AOL has increased access availability in rural areas. Forty percent of the survey respondents reported clinical dietetics (medical nutrition therapy) as their primary area of practice.

Although traditional CE activities are more likely to be offered in metropolitan areas, as mentioned earlier, dietitians are finding it increasingly difficult to attend these sessions, especially if they are offered during regular working hours. Thus CE via computer conferencing may be of equal interest to dietitians in urban areas as it would be to those in rural areas.

While the journal club described in this paper is intended for registered dietitians, several CE opportunities exist on the World Wide Web and AOL for other health care professionals. The Medical Studies Seminar on AOL offers Category I continuing medical education (CME) credit for physicians through Southern Illinois University.⁵ Participants are asked to read journal articles from the Journal of the American Medical Association and participate in real time discussions of the articles in the AOL chat rooms. There is a \$10 fee to register, and journal club sessions are held on a monthly basis.

Several sites on the World Wide Web offer category I CME for reading articles posted at these sites and completing a post-test. MedConnect Interactive Educational Programs <<http://www.medconnect.com/finalhtm/intacedu.htm>> asks participants to read an essay, then take an interactive quiz to earn one CME credit.

Cancer Control: Journal of the Moffitt Cancer Center <<http://daisy.moffitt.usf.edu/cancjrnl/aboutcme.html>> offers up to four hours of Category I CME through the University of South Florida College of Medicine.

Medscape <<http://www.scp.com/Medscape/Public/SCP/Announcements/CMELaunch.announce.html>> offers one hour of CME for reading three articles and taking a post-test. There is a \$50 registration fee, which allows for up to 20 hours of CME within six months of subscribing.

The Clinical Concepts home study course from the Southern Medical Association <<http://www.sma.org/cdindex.htm>> requires participants to read several articles posted at the site, and complete a post-test for

two Category I CME credits. This service is free to members, and \$30 per module for non-members.

CONCLUSION

Real time computer conferencing using on-line service providers offers a new and convenient opportunity for continuing professional education for those who are currently finding their options limited. Credentialing agencies are beginning to recognize this technology as an acceptable format for CME, however, further research evaluating the quality of these educational opportunities is needed.

References

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